

VZCZCXRO7505

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RUEHYG
DE RUEHROV #0223/01 2961613
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 231613Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0533
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0561

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000223

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: DAS MADISON MEETING WITH DEPUTY FM ON CUBA,
NICARAGUA

REF: Vatican 213

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[1](#)1. (C) Summary. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) WHA DAS Kirsten Madison, accompanied by DCM, called on
Monsignor Pietro Parolin on October 23 to discuss Cuba and
Nicaragua. Parolin is the Holy See's Undersecretary for
Relations with States (equivalent to deputy foreign minister).

Cuba

[1](#)3. (C) Madison described Cuba as undergoing a change from
revolutionary leadership to institutions of dictatorship. The
regime suffering from internal divisions relating to this change
and the accompanying need to share power in new ways. The USG
does not expect Fidel to return to power, at least not in his
former capacity. Madison told Parolin that the USG wants to
engage the world on how to support Cubans: change there is a
matter for Cubans to decide, but we can help. The Western
Hemisphere is now largely defined by democracies working
together in various ways, and Cuba needs to become part of that
community. Madison described Cubans as hopeful but fearful, and
said repression is currently increasing. It's clear that a
dynastic succession won't succeed. The USG intention is to help
Cubans build capacity and communicate with each other. We want
Cubans to be able to seek peaceful change.

[1](#)4. (C) Parolin recalled the 1998 visit to Cuba of the late Pope
John Paul II, in which he said that Cuba and the world needed to
open up to each other. However, the situation is very delicate
right now. For the Holy See, a peaceful transition is the
highest priority to avoid violence and a destabilizing exodus.
This transition can be helped by strengthening existing
democratic forces. We must be careful, he said, not to provoke
the regime into an overreaction, or let outside support for
democracy be seen as foreign interference. Parolin observed
that the Holy See tends to agree with the positions of Osvaldo
Paya.

[1](#)5. (C) Parolin wondered how strong the desire for change really
is among ordinary Cubans, as opposed to activists. Madison
assured him that it was genuine, and illustrated her point with
some examples. For instance, whereas normally the US admits
20,000 Cubans legally and almost the same number who arrive
through irregular means, migration dropped to zero during the
initial period of Fidel's illness; we read this as a sign that
Cubans were hopeful of positive change. She also cited a recent
Spanish poll indicating that some 80 percent of young Cubans

wanted "significant change" in Cuba.

¶16. (C) Parolin asked if the popular pressure for political change would lessen if the Cuban economy were to improve; Madison said that in a command society such as Cuba, the socioeconomic situation could not be separated from the political situation. The economy would not improve without a weakening of the government's control over labor, for example. Madison reiterated that the USG wants to look forward, and plan for an emerging Cuba. Our law, policy, and politics all make clear that a change in the USG stance toward Cuba will depend on a positive change in Cuba itself. However, it's not a simplistic requirement that Cuba become a full-fledged democracy overnight; rather, USG assistance could respond according to the pace of change in Cuba (e.g., release of political prisoners, steps toward elections, etc.). Parolin said this appeared to be a very realistic policy; one should not wait for complete change before doing something to help.

¶17. (C) Parolin asked Madison what she thought the role of the Church should be in Cuba. Madison said that would be for the Church to decide, but there is surely a need for Cubans to have spiritual support. Parolin said the Church is always working for the future, for new society, more freedom of worship, freedom of the press, etc., according to its own social doctrine. However, the Church must avoid being identified as part of the opposition. The papal nuncio in Havana is very open to Paya, he said, but we need to be patient. In the discussion which followed, Parolin clarified that he does not expect a rapid transition in Cuba. As for the Church itself, events in Eastern Europe in the 1990s suggested that increased political freedom does not necessarily lead to increased piety or Church participation. As the pope had said, everything depends on how you use your freedom. Parolin doubted that Cubans, lacking any religious education for the past two generations, would be morally prepared for the challenge facing them. The new era of freedom, he said, is also a challenge to the Church.

Nicaragua

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¶18. (C) Parolin raised the topic of Nicaragua. Noting that he had spoken with ambassador and DCM on this recently (reftel), he acknowledged that the behavior of retired Cardinal Obando y Bravo was of considerable concern to the Holy See. He again promised that the Holy See would try to get Obando to avoid political involvement. He asked that the USG take care to distinguish between the actions of the cardinal and those of his successor, or those of the Church as a whole. He emphasized the importance of keeping ecclesiastics out of politics on principle.

Comment

¶19. (C) Parolin welcomed DAS Madison's visit and listened carefully to her description of the situation in Cuba and the USG position regarding changes in that country. He readily agreed that Cuba needed more freedoms, more economic development, and more democracy. His caution about avoiding violence and uncontrollable refugee flows was clearly apparent, as was the longstanding Holy See preference for a careful, patient, and low-key approach. Parolin's comments about Eastern Europe were especially interesting in this regard, suggesting that the overnight transition to Western-style economies outstripped the ability of Eastern societies to adapt, resulting in high levels of corruption, profiteering, and social vices. The Holy See thus does not expect rapid change in Cuba, and indeed may fear that rapid change may cause a moral decline there. Parolin's attention to Nicaragua (a subject he raised himself) was also welcome, confirming the effectiveness of our earlier approach on this subject.

ROONEY